

## **SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY JAIL**

The county jail, located on Highway 1 between the cities of San Luis Obispo and Morro Bay, is operated by the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department. The facility houses inmates who have been convicted of misdemeanors or felonies, inmates who have not been sentenced, and some who are awaiting transport to a state prison.

### **Authority for the Inquiry**

Penal Code §925 states, "The grand jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments or functions of the county."

### **Method of Inquiry**

The bases for this report include a grand jury tour of the jail and a meeting and follow-up discussions with the sheriff. Additional information reviewed for this report include statistical data provided by members of the Sheriff's Department, and a summary of the *Board of Corrections Biennial Inspection Report* dated February 26, 2004.

### **Description of the Inquiry**

Grand Jurors toured the county jail on October 27, 2003, accompanied by the sheriff and a correctional lieutenant. Issues of concern include overcrowding in the women's section of the jail, the prevalence of inmates requiring mental health services, and inmate safety cells.

#### **Jail - Women's section**

The California Board of Corrections (BOC) conducts biennial inspections of the jail, in accordance with Penal Code §6031. The approved board rated capacity of the jail is for 412 male and 41 female inmates. However, there are currently 75 beds in the women's areas. The cells and dormitory units we observed were not only crowded, but the single cells contained two beds and some prisoners were required to sleep on mattresses on the floor. The average daily population of female prisoners in 2003 was 62. During the months of October and November 2003, there were nine days when the female population was over 80, peaking at 89 on October 23.

The February, 2004 BOC inspection of the jail found the women's jail facilities, including the female single cells, dorm and honor farm "...continue to remain out of compliance with Title 24 regulations due to the beds placed in these areas" (2/26/04 BOC letter to

Sheriff Hedges). This finding was also reported in the 2001 BOC inspection. Previous Grand Jury reports have recommended that this problem be addressed.

According to the Sheriff's Department, funds for expansion of the women's facilities have been requested through the County's Capital Improvement Project process each year since fiscal year 1990-91. The county budget office confirmed that expansion of the women's jail is included in a master plan for development of the jail site, and that \$694,000 was included in the 1999-2000 budget for design work on the project. At the start of the 2003-2004 fiscal year, there was \$562,000 remaining of this approved amount.

### **Mental health**

An increasing percentage of the jail inmate population is in need of mental health services. The Sheriff's Department cites the County Mental Health staff estimates that 30 percent of the inmates are receiving medication or counseling for mental health issues. To address these issues, the Sheriff's Department is partially funding a mental health therapist located at the jail. The department also reports that, in conjunction with the Mental Health Department, it has initiated a program that provides inmates with a ten day supply of medication upon their release from the jail. In addition, the Sheriff's Department is active in the county's Homeless Task Force which is seeking to address the problem within current systems, rather than create additional organizational overhead and expense.

### **Cameras in safety cells**

Previous Grand Juries have recommended that cameras be placed in the jail cells where suicide-prone inmates are housed. The Sheriff's Department August 2000 response to this recommendation stated that this was not necessary since they had been successful with their existing program for monitoring suicide-prone inmates. The department later explained that an exposed video camera in the cell could become a suicide risk factor.

We inspected these cells during our tour of the jail and expressed concern that a small window in the door was the only means of visually monitoring the inmate. In subsequent discussions with the Grand Jury, the sheriff confirmed that current technology would allow enclosed cameras to be installed in the cells, and that he is exploring funding to acquire them.

### **Conclusion**

The 2001-2002 Grand Jury reported on the overcrowding in the women's jail and recommended that the sheriff act to correct the situation. We join them in highlighting this unacceptable situation. Without funding and county action, however, the Sheriff's Department cannot expand the facility. It is the responsibility of the Board of Supervisors and the county to move quickly beyond the design stage to implement a solution to this ongoing problem.

The Sheriff's Department appears to effectively operate and maintain a secure facility with limited resources. They are to be commended for their efforts in coordinating with the Mental Health Department to provide services to the increasing number of inmates who require counseling and/or medication. We also commend the sheriff for working toward adding enclosed cameras in the safety cells. Given the increased inmate population with mental health issues, it would be reasonable to expect that the number of inmates with suicidal tendencies would also increase.

The jail staff, who are not trained mental health professionals, are likely to feel additional stress in working with the mentally ill population in the jail. We encourage the department to work with the Mental Health Department and to identify other resources in order to provide the jail staff with appropriate training in working with mentally ill inmates.

### **Required Response**

This is an informational report. No formal response to this 2003-2004 Grand Jury report is required from any agency.

